



**Maura D. Corrigan, chief justice of the Michigan Supreme Court, speaks at the State Bar of Michigan meeting.**

# Keep open mind on court merger, judge asks

**By Lawrence R. Heibel**  
The Grand Rapids Press

State Supreme Court Chief Justice Maura D. Corrigan asked a gathering of Michigan lawyers and judges Thursday to look carefully at a proposal to consolidate the state court system and not put personal interests ahead of what is best for the justice system.

"All I ask is that we bring to this process our open, participating minds and move forward, for the sake of the people of Michigan," Corrigan said.

She was the keynote luncheon speaker at the 67th annual meeting of the State Bar of Michigan at the Amway Grand Plaza Hotel. Corrigan cited lessons learned from the heroes of Sept. 11 that lawyers and judges should take to heart when dealing with the changes that have come with tight budgets and a move by the Legislature to consolidate the trial

courts in the circuit, probate and district courts.

"The time is now to act on the topic," Corrigan said. "I call on you to practice especially courage and fidelity to your oaths as we face the challenges of the year to come. 'Let's Roll.'"

Corrigan said court consolidation is under consideration by the Legislature, but wouldn't take a stand on the current legislation. She said allowing trial court judges to work in family, criminal and civil divisions based on the demands of the court's workload would allow a single court budget and a financial savings to counties. She said county governments are in favor of court consolidation because on average 40 percent of a county's budget is spent on courts.

A "demonstration project" experiment in court consolidation in nine counties proved consolidation works, Corrigan said. The project also showed consolida-

tion speeds up the trial process that puts a huge demand on families. Last year, 262,000 — or 70 percent of all case filings in circuit court — were family court cases.

"If each one involves a mother, father and one child, that is nearly 800,000 people," Corrigan said. "Their journey through the courts should not be longer or more pain-filled than absolutely necessary."

Bruce Neckers, president of the State Bar of Michigan, said with the state of the economy and government budgets in crisis, court consolidation is a major concern to the bar association. A Grand Rapids lawyer, Neckers said he was happy the bar could have its annual meeting here as he completes his one-year term as president.

"It's a very important message that's being communicated to judges and lawyers," Neckers said. "This is a great op-

portunity to show off our city to judges and lawyers from all over Michigan."

About 2,000 of the state bar's 34,500 members were expected in Grand Rapids Thursday and today. The event featured Corrigan's address as well as workshops panel discussions and a presentation by the Open Justice Commission that highlighted stories of citizens, lawyers and judges who overcame the challenges of disabilities, bias and discrimination, and succeeded.

The bar association also honored five individuals with their "Champions of Justice" award. The honors went to local U.S. Chief District Judge Robert Holme Bell and Ann M. Cooper, a partner in the Grand Rapids law firm of Drew, Coope and Anding. Also recognized were attorney Henry Baskin of Birmingham, attorney James R. Neuhard of Detroit and University of Michigan Professor Theodore J. St. Antoine.